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**VOICES  
FROM  
ERITREA**

# VOICES FROM ERITREA

*Edited by Rachel Warner, Education Officer, Minority Rights Group*

Rachel Warner has a degree in Psychology and a Diploma in Education (Language in Education in a Multicultural Society). She has taught English in India, and English as a Second Language to bilingual students in secondary schools in Leicester and High Wycombe. She was Head of the ESL Department of an inner London comprehensive school before becoming MRG's Education Officer in February 1990. She is the author of seven multicultural books for young children.

The Minority Rights Group was founded in the 1960s. Its principal aim is to secure justice for minority (and non-dominant majority groups) suffering discrimination by:

- Researching, publishing and distributing the facts as widely as possible to raise public knowledge and awareness of minority issues worldwide;
- Advocating and publicising all aspects of the human rights of minorities to draw attention to violations and to aid the prevention of dangerous and destructive conflicts;
- Educating, through its research, publications and schools programme, on issues relating to prejudice, discrimination and group conflicts.

The Minority Rights Group published its first Report on Eritrea in 1971, with further editions in 1973 and 1976. It published a new Report with a section on Tigray in 1983.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **NOTE TO TEACHERS**

These autobiographical accounts by Eritrean refugees were collected in both English and Tigrinya, by English as a Second Language teachers in London schools and by Tibra Ghidey, a Tigrinya language teacher. Most stories were written, but a few were oral accounts. After being written in English, all were then translated into Tigrinya. An editorial decision was made to correct the English where necessary, without losing the flavour of the original account. Some of the participants have written several accounts which appear in different sections of the book. If there are any minor factual inaccuracies in the testimonies they have been left unaltered.

### **Suggested uses of Voices from Eritrea**

This book will be a valuable resource for English teachers encouraging autobiographical writing (National Curriculum English AT3) at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. The variation in complexity and length of the accounts makes the book very suitable for use at different Key Stages. Some of the accounts would support teaching about migration for National Curriculum Geography AT4. The book raises issues of human rights, being a refugee, and living in a multicultural society, and so is a useful resource for the Cross-Curricular theme of Education for Citizenship, particularly to support the components 'A Pluralist Society' and 'Being a Citizen'. This dual-text book will meet a pressing need for relevant materials to use with Eritrean students and as such will be invaluable for English as a Second Language teachers, Tigrinya language teachers and adult education tutors.

## **REFUGEES**

Refugees have left Eritrea during the long war of independence. Many have walked over the border into Sudan and ended up in refugee camps. Those with money and/or connections have gone on to Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany, the USA or Britain. From mid 1990 the number of young Eritreans ('unaccompanied minors') coming to Britain increased dramatically. As war casualties mounted for the Ethiopian forces, they attacked Eritrean citizens in Asmara and in Addis Ababa. In desperation, families who could raise the money sent their children out of the country to safety. Some unaccompanied minors' stories are included in this book. Of the 10,000 Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees in Britain, most are in London. They have fled a country shattered by intensive aerial bombing, with destroyed cities, drought and continuous war for the last 30 years. It is some of these refugees' voices that are heard in this book.

Rachel Warner *July 1991*

# MEMORIES OF ERITREA

## HARVEST TIME

I especially remember harvest time in Eritrea, in our village. After they had gathered the wheat and barley in, my father and brothers used oxen for threshing. They had four oxen who walked on the grain in a circle to separate the grain from the stalk. They did this in a special place called a *houdi* – a round hard smooth place in a field. The women's job was to winnow – to separate the grain from the chaff. We used baskets to do this – we held the basket of grain up and let it fall and the wind would help blow the chaff away.



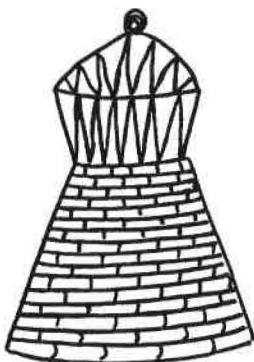
Martin Whiteside/Christian Aid

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Working in the fields

The men used to go to the *houdi* first, at four or five in the morning. I used to go at about 10 o'clock with the women. We used to take food for the men to eat in an *agelgerle*, a special kind of basket. We took *gogo* (a kind of bread made from barley), *injera* (another kind of bread), *tsebeih* (meat sauce), *suwa* (home-made beer), and coffee for the men to have after their work. We took over the winnowing after the men had finished their work. When the grain was completely clean and separated, we took it home. Sometimes after finishing all this, in the early evening, I had to take the oxen to another field so they could get good grass after their day's work. I used to love singing loudly when I was looking after the animals.

**Selas Hailu,**  
Tigrinya Mother Tongue class, Brixton



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A mosub or geebabo (basket) for keeping injera in after cooking

## GOING TO THE CINEMA IN ASMARA

I lived in Asmara in Eritrea. Every Sunday I went to the cinema with my friends and we usually saw an Indian film. We used to go there at lunchtime at about 12 o'clock and we came back at about eight o'clock. Usually I went to the cinema with six or seven of my friends. We sat upstairs and made a lot of noise. We were imitating the actions we saw on the film, and shouting and clapping. We always bought something to eat, like cakes and ice-cream. We saw the same film three times but we still enjoyed it. Even after we had left the cinema we had conversations about the film on the bus home.

**Saade-Din, 16 years old**  
Hurlingham and Chelsea School, London

## MEMORIES OF SCHOOL

It was a Saturday afternoon at exactly two o'clock in the heart of Asmara when I was born. Until I was one year old I was never called by my name, I was just called "the baby". This is what my parents tell me, I can't remember it.

Now I want to come to what I do remember. When I was seven years old I started school. Those early years at school are unforgettable for me. What I remember most is singing and holding hands with the other children, first thing in the morning. After we had sung together we went off to our own classes with our own teachers. Every class had their own teacher Mine was called *Memher* (Teacher) Semere. I stayed with him for three years and he was very helpful – not just educationally; if you were in trouble or sad he would help you. After three years at school I became mature, or as our ancestors say, "Grass and the heart grows every day."

**Solomon O'Michael, 17 years old**  
Stockwell Park Tigrinya Saturday School, London

## DRINKING COFFEE IN ERITREA

Here in England I miss afternoon coffee in Eritrea. Every day people have coffee in the afternoon, with their family or neighbours. People sit around and talk about their work and how the day has been. There's a really nice atmosphere, before the evening comes.

It takes about three hours to have afternoon coffee because it has to be done in a special way. The women always do it. First we measure the green coffee beans by hand. You need one handful for two people and so on. We wash the beans and then we put them in a small pan with a long handle called a *menkeshkesh* for cooking.

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menkeshkesh

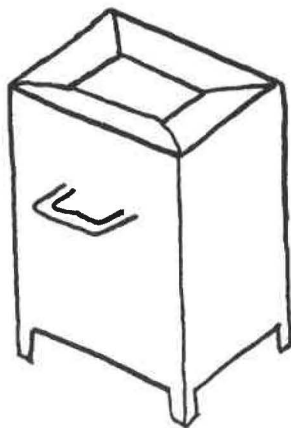


We cook the beans until they're dark brown and then we grind them. Here in England I have a coffee grinder but in Eritrea I used a pestle and mortar, called a *mewket boon*.



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mewket boon

We put the ground coffee beans on a special mat called a *mishrafat* and used the mat to pour the ground coffee into a metal coffee pot called a *jebena*. We add water and let the coffee boil on top of the stove, called a *fernello*.



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fernello

We use the mat, the *mishrafat*, to fan the coal in the stove to make it really hot. We wait until the coffee boils. It has to boil three times and every time it boils we take off a little bit of water, in a jug. It's shameful for the woman making the coffee if it boils over and goes all over the place, so we have to be careful.



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jebena

When the coffee's ready we use the fibre from dates to filter it – we put some of the fibre in the neck of the pot. We leave the coffee to settle and put sugar in each of the cups on the tray. Then we fill each of the cups. The cups are called *finjal*. It's important that the woman serves the coffee nicely, and sits nicely, squatting down. Again if she doesn't it's considered shameful. The woman isn't supposed to get up much when she's serving coffee, so she has to keep everything by her. People judge you as a woman by the way you serve coffee.

You usually serve coffee four times. The first serving is the strongest, it's called *awel*. If there isn't enough for everyone the *awel* goes to the most important people there, like the grandfather or a guest. Then you add water to the pot and boil the coffee again. The second serving is called *kajai*. The third serving is called *bereka*, which means blessing. It's quite weak. It's our custom that if you have the second serving you must have the third. It's considered rude to go without it. The fourth serving is called *dereja*. It is only for older people, say over about 40. The coffee is very weak by the fourth serving, and it is only done if there are old people present. We serve popcorn (*kolo*) with the coffee and we burn incense with the *awel* and the *bereka*.

Here in England people are too busy to make time to have coffee for three hours. In Eritrea even if people are busy they make the time. I hardly ever make coffee in the Eritrean way here. Although it's a nice time for people to talk, it's very time-consuming, and only women do it. Men escape from all the hard work.

### Tibra Ghidey

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Tibra Ghidey serving coffee in Eritrea



# FAMILY

## MY SISTER

My sister's name is Alganesh. She is the oldest in our family. She was born in 1957 in Eritrea, East Africa. Our family love each other very much.

Our parents sent us to school when we were young. Alganesh started to study when she was seven years old in 1964. She was clever and the first in her class. She helped our mum at home and sometimes she helped our dad outside the house to look after our cattle.

But because of the war in our country, my sister joined the army in 1975. She had studied for 10 years up to that time, and she was in the commercial school when she left to join the the army. My second brother joined the army the same year as her. Because of this our family were in a bad state. They were very sad, especially our mother who was very sick.

Alganesh joined the ELF but my brother joined the EPLF. When she was with the army, my sister was a member of the central committee of the General Union of peasants in Eritrea. She taught a lot of women and young people how to read and write Tigrinya. She also helped a lot of people in village areas form co-operative shops.

She was also fighting against the army of Ethiopia with the ELF for many years. She was loved very much by her friends. She was a political cadre of the ELF army. After the civil war in Eritrea in 1980 between the two big forces, EPLF and ELF, she was in Korokon, the border of Eritrea and Sudan with her organisation for two years. The army was disarmed by the Sudanese government and there was also disagreement among the leadership of the ELF. Because of this, the ELF was divided into three groups. After this she worked for two years as a political teacher for Eritrean women in Port Sudan.

At the end of 1985, she stopped to struggle as a soldier and went to Khartoum, Sudan. She met a lot of her friends and stayed there for a short time.

In December 1985 she came to England as a refugee. After she came to England she had a baby boy in 1986 and she started to study English at ESL classes as well as doing a business course for four months. Alganesh's son is called Habien – he is four years old and he is a lovely, healthy boy.



Mike Goldwater NETWORK/Christian Aid

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A young women fighter in the EPLF

I joined my sister in England in September 1989 as a refugee. I am really very happy to be with my sister. I came from the problem of war in our country. I love my country, but I can't live peacefully there. The Ethiopians tried to arrest me. So I walked to Sudan through the forests of Eritrea, a long journey. I am lucky I had the chance to join my older sister. At this time, we are living together happily in England.

**Nebai Gebremariam, 16 years old**  
**Lilian Baylis School, London**

# THE WAR IN ERITREA

## FIGHTING IN ASMARA

It was that unforgettable night in Asmara, a Friday in January in 1975, at about eight o'clock. The normally quiet city was full of shooting. My sister, mother and I didn't know what to do. The only refuge we could take was under the bed. The older people were praying, but we children just played under the bed. For one week our life, our food, everything was under the bed. I don't know who told us under the bed was safe!



Mike Weiss/E.R.A.

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Eritrean children playing at war

We heard rumours that the fighting would get worse so we left Asmara for our family's village. Our village was about 60 kilometres away, or about two hours journey from Asmara. The only people who could get away were those that had relatives in the Ethiopian army. One of our relatives had been forced to be in the Ethiopian army, he was a commando, and he told us that women and children had been killed. My mother was sick with fear.

Because we were used to life in the city of Asmara, village life was difficult for us. We were used to having water from taps – now we had to walk an hour to the well to get water. We were used to having gas or coal in Asmara – now we had to collect firewood. Apart from collecting water and wood, we didn't even try to do the other jobs in the village.

We spent two months in the village like this. My mother owned a shop in Asmara and she had closed it when we left for the village. Then a paper came to the village saying that we had to open the shop again. The fighting had died down. My sister stayed in the village but I went back to Asmara with my mum. I was so happy to be back in the city!

**Fireweini Mogos,**  
**Clapham Adult Education Institute, London**

## MEMORIES OF WAR

As I was looking for my documents, I found an old photograph buried among a sheaf of papers. I carefully took it out and held it in my hand; for a minute or two I did not recognise myself on the picture. I was surprised to find it there, but at the same time I was glad I had found it. The black-and-white photograph of me and my brother was taken in the village of Dikisheahai in Eritrea in 1976. The photograph brought back many memories of my childhood.

It brought back memories of the village I used to live in. I will never forget that village; who could forget the blue rivers, the palm trees and beautiful hills? It was just like paradise. Maybe I did not realise it then, but I certainly do now, that it was the most significant time of my life.

As well as bringing back good memories it also brought back bad ones. There was one particular incident that I will not forget. I can remember that day clearly.

My brother and I walked to my friend's house and I can remember how extremely difficult it was walking bare footed – the sharp jagged rocks cut into the soles of our feet. It was a beautiful sunny day and we decided to go to a hill to play. It was fun climbing the hill, but it was certainly not just fun we experienced that day. As we were playing I heard the sound of a gun being fired. I was confused and did not know what was happening. As I was standing on the hill, I could see the outline of a big gun hidden behind a rock and still pointing towards the hill, then I heard a thunderous volley of bullets. Suddenly I yelled at my brother and my friend to lie down on the ground. As they fell to the ground I felt a sudden cold feeling in my shoulder and my heart was beating so hard I thought it was going to burst. After a short while I felt blood trickling down my arm and body. I had been shot in the shoulder.



Roger West

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Betiel Mehari in London

As the tears ran down my face, and onto my injured shoulder, I shrieked in agony. The soldiers were still shooting; my brother and friend slowly came and lay next to me. As he was only four years old he cried and said, "Betty, what happened to you?"

I did not answer, I just grabbed him and held him by the other arm. Suddenly the shooting stopped but I could hear someone yelling, "You killed my daughter, you killed the children." It was my friend's father.

When he came to the hill he stared at us. Then he came and wiped my tears and said "You all are very brave". He took his scarf off and bandaged the wound. Then he lifted me onto his shoulder and carried me down the hill. The soldiers were silent as they watched him coming down the hill. I was unable to speak. My grandmother screamed and cried. My uncle told her to be quiet. I was losing a lot of blood. They decided to take me to the medical centre.

I can remember my uncle climbing the enormous reddish-brown mountain with me on his strong shoulders. As he staggered I cried, "What is happening to me, uncle?" He did not say anything. He perspired heavily and the sweat streamed down his forehead and occasionally he slipped even though he had sandals designed for this terrain.

Finally we arrived at the medical centre after an hour's journey. This however did not end the problem. Five soldiers were already queuing there, their faces filled with fear. At the time I did not understand why; now I realise it was the fear of death. The war of two sides raged around me as a child. But the significance of this escaped me even after being shot. I can recall one face vividly. His eyes were red and swollen, as if he had been crying for days. They had dark rings under them. His hair was matted and his lips were dry and cracked. I will never forget that man's face. It haunts me and fills me with fear.

We waited patiently in the queue. I was feeling dizzy, but I could not say a word. Slowly but gradually each soldier was treated, inside the tent. As the night fell and coolness arrived, my turn came.

**Betiel Mehari, now 19 years old  
written while at Southwark Sixth Form  
Centre, London**



# LEAVING ERITREA

## LEAVING MY COUNTRY

I was born in a small village in Eritrea. I grew up in a family of nine children and I am the eighth child. I have three brothers and five sisters. The area where we lived was very nice with green grass and big mountains. We had a big farm and kept cows, goats, sheep, oxen and horses.

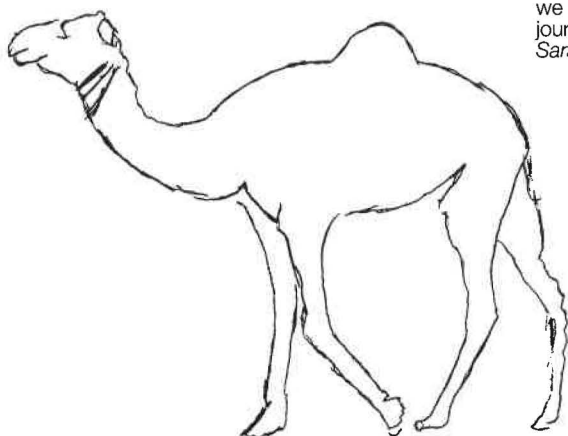
When I was seven years old I started elementary school and was there for six years. In 1987 when I was 13 years old I left my school and my country to escape to Sudan, because the Ethiopian military took the youngest people into the army. Before I started to walk to Sudan I bought some things – tablets for malaria, matches, dry bread (*koronsho*), needle and thread and a sheet to take with me. I escaped from my country at five o'clock in the afternoon. I walked for one week. We had to hide from the Ethiopian soldiers as we walked. I arrived at Sheraro. Sheraro is a small town in Tigray and I stayed there three weeks. After that I went to Gedaref in Sudan.

When I was in Sudan I lived with an old Eritrean woman for two and a half years. Life was very difficult for me. I missed my parents and family very much. Also I didn't go to school during those years. In 1989 I came to England. At Heathrow I met two Eritrean men. They had lived in England before, and knew about England. They asked if I had any money and when I said no, they gave me a pound. They said you can phone 10 times with a pound in England. They told me to phone my sister. I thanked them but I didn't know how to use the phone, and I didn't ask them. When the doctor examined me I was very terrified. The immigration man said, "Can you ask your sister to come now?" but I didn't understand anything. When I saw my sister at last, I cried tears of joy.

**Sara Sielu, 16 years old**  
**Hurlingham and Chelsea School, London**

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The kind of camel we had on our journey to Sudan - Sara Sielu



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My village in Eritrea - Nasir Mohamed

## WALKING TO SUDAN

I left Eritrea when I was 11 years old. There was a war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Ethiopia put my father in prison. He has been in prison since 1986. When he first went into prison I was very shocked. My sister and I were frightened we would be put in the army, so we left Eritrea. My mother stayed there.

My sister Kadra and I walked to Sudan. We left my country at night. There were many of us wanting to walk to Sudan. I was carrying bread, water and a *gabi* which is a kind of blanket. I also had a knife to kill wolves. We had to walk at night to hide from the Ethiopian soldiers. I felt so exhausted, and my skin was black from mosquito bites. I ate every other day – one day I ate, the next day I didn't. It took about two weeks to get to Sudan. Sudan was very hot. It was very difficult for me because I didn't speak Arabic. We stayed in Sudan for a month before coming to England.

**Nasir Mohamed, 15 years old**  
**Hurlingham and Chelsea School, London**

## MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD: LEAVING ERITREA

5.35pm. Darkness was falling as the night drew in. The rain hit the ground and the wind gathered around the trees. Standing at the bus stop, I was getting wetter and wetter. As I did not have an umbrella I was shivering. There was still no sign of the bus. The gutters were running with water. Each car that went past splashed the water over the pavement and into my shoes. At last the bus came. Slowly, as I got on, I could smell a strong smell of closely packed bodies. The bus was crowded and the windows were steamed up. Every time I wiped the window it clouded over again. As I gazed out at

this typical English weather, I started to remember where I was this day nine years ago.

It was a brilliant, cool, cloudless June in Eritrea. This was the time that I most liked: warm during the day, and cool with tongues of wind licking the trees during the night. The village to which our family had come was a scattering of some 20 huts. The village was small but beautiful. Most of the huts were built of clay. There were some cottages, of course, but they were for the so-called rich. We had beds, cupboards and tables which were made of clay. Those beds were actually stuck to the ground – sleeping in them was like sleeping on a rock. They were extremely uncomfortable.

I suppose everyone has had an adventure in their life. At the age of seven I crossed the desert. At the time it did not seem an adventurous thing to do. It was a journey of survival. It was a pilgrimage towards a better life. However, looking back at it now, it was a momentous trip.

Living in the village was like living in heaven. I know it sounds too good to be true. But I could tell you that those were the happiest days of my life. However the fairy tale did not continue. On September 29th my grandmother announced that we are leaving the village for good. She told us that we were going to Sudan to live with my parents. I had not seen them since they had left the country. Long before our family came to this village, we used to own a chemist's shop in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. However when the war between my country and Ethiopia got worse, my parents decided to help our soldiers by providing them with medicine. When the Ethiopian government found out that my parents were supplying medicine to their enemy, they burned the chemist's shop down and tried to kill them. Even though I missed my parents very much, I did not want to leave the village and friends who I loved to go to Sudan. I cried and the little voice inside of me screamed silently. But who would listen to a child, who would understand how I felt?

On the 30th September, we were ready to leave. My grandmother had arranged everything that we needed – the luggage and dry food. The time had come when I had to say goodbye to those people who I loved and admired; and believe me it was the hardest thing I ever did. That night we had dinner with my uncle's family. While we were having dinner, they were discussing where they were going to hire a camel, and how we were going to get out of the village without the soldiers noticing us. I was quiet; I felt that my life was ruined and I blamed my parents. I blamed them for leaving me first, then

taking me away from my friends. I was too selfish to notice that they were saving my life and giving me a better future.

As the sun set and the dark was falling, our pilgrimage began. It was decided that we would walk during the night. At 7.35pm, the village looked so isolated and frightening. It was so quiet that you could hear the sound of the trees moving. As I said goodbye, knowing in my heart that I would never see them again, I held in my strong emotions and tried not to cry. As I looked down at my brother and sister I wished I was as young as them, not knowing anything. My uncle and grandmother grabbed my hands and told me it was time to go; I noticed in their eyes they weren't as sad as I was. When we stepped out from the hut, the donkey was loaded with our food and it was ready to go. My grandmother said her last words to my uncle's family and my uncle hugged his youngest son. I knew it was time to move on. I held my brother's hand tightly and waved my last goodbye. The moon was shining and leading our way. When we had walked a little way I turned my head and saw the receding shadows of my uncle's family. Now that my uncle was carrying my brother and I was walking, behind I felt lonely, but somehow I felt the moon was guiding me.

The moon was shining on our heads. The donkey was tapping and crackling as it walked along; silently we walked for hours on end, trying not to make any noise. We hadn't said a word since the journey started. My sister drifted to sleep, so my grandmother decided to put her on the donkey's back, and I heard my brother snoring on my uncle's shoulders. I was alone once again, struggling to catch up with grandmother. Walking through the sharp jagged rocks, I was tired and frightened of the dark. I looked around and I could only see the darkness of the night and hear the silence. Then suddenly I slipped and hurt my knee on the sharp rocks. "Grandma!" I cried.

"Can't you look where you going, what are you trying to do, get us killed by the soldiers?" I walked in silence. Tears were running down my face and my knees bled. I was limping step by step towards our destination. Daylight arose at last and we were really there. I could see the village miles ahead of us. It had been a long night. I was yawning and nodding off to sleep, but at the same time was relieved. By that time I was in my grandmother's arms. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

1.30pm: the sun was shining in my face; as I opened my eyes and gazed around me I found myself lying next to a camel. I stood up quickly and

started to look for my grandmother; and there she was sleeping next to another camel, with my sister and brother beside her. Our luggage was on the ground and the donkey was gone. My uncle had probably sold it to the people who were standing around us. One of them was dressed up in a long pale blue tunic and trousers and was muffled in a huge white turban. He was our guide. Our goal was to cross the desert by camel in two months. Riding on a camel was extremely uncomfortable. The camel that I rode had only one hump. It was swinging like a see-saw. My grandmother shared hers with my sister and my uncle with my brother. I was on my own as usual. We had two men to guide us – they were holding the camels and walking in front of them.

As the camels swung up and down, we rode hours on end. It was getting hotter and hotter. I felt dizzy and perspired heavily and sweat streamed down my face. At last I saw the first glimpse of the desert. The camels walked in one line and followed each others footsteps. I could see a stunning sea of sand. The delicately shaded hues of sands and rocks ranging from the palest ochre to deep red, violet, brown and grey, hidden in folds of sand dunes, among arid cliffs spreading their beautiful greens when we camped at night. Mohammed, our guide, built a tent which was made of sheep's wool and goat hair. My grandmother built her own fire a little way off, brewing her heavily sugared mint tea. Then we all gathered to drink some and eat some bread. That's all we had that night.

The nights are cold and more frightening than the days. That night my eyelids wouldn't close from excitement and fear. Inside the tent, our family were sleeping in bedrolls. There was grandmother, Feben, Robell and me. My uncle and the two men were sleeping outside beside the camels; it was to make sure that the camels didn't run off at night. The colours at sunrise were magnificent, the light brushed over with sand and turned into dry strokes of brilliant and subtle colours over the desert floor.

When I woke up I found everyone awake. I wanted to wash my face with water but my grandmother wouldn't allow me to.

"Have you forgotten where you are?" she asked.

"No, grandma", I said.

"Come and eat something," she said.

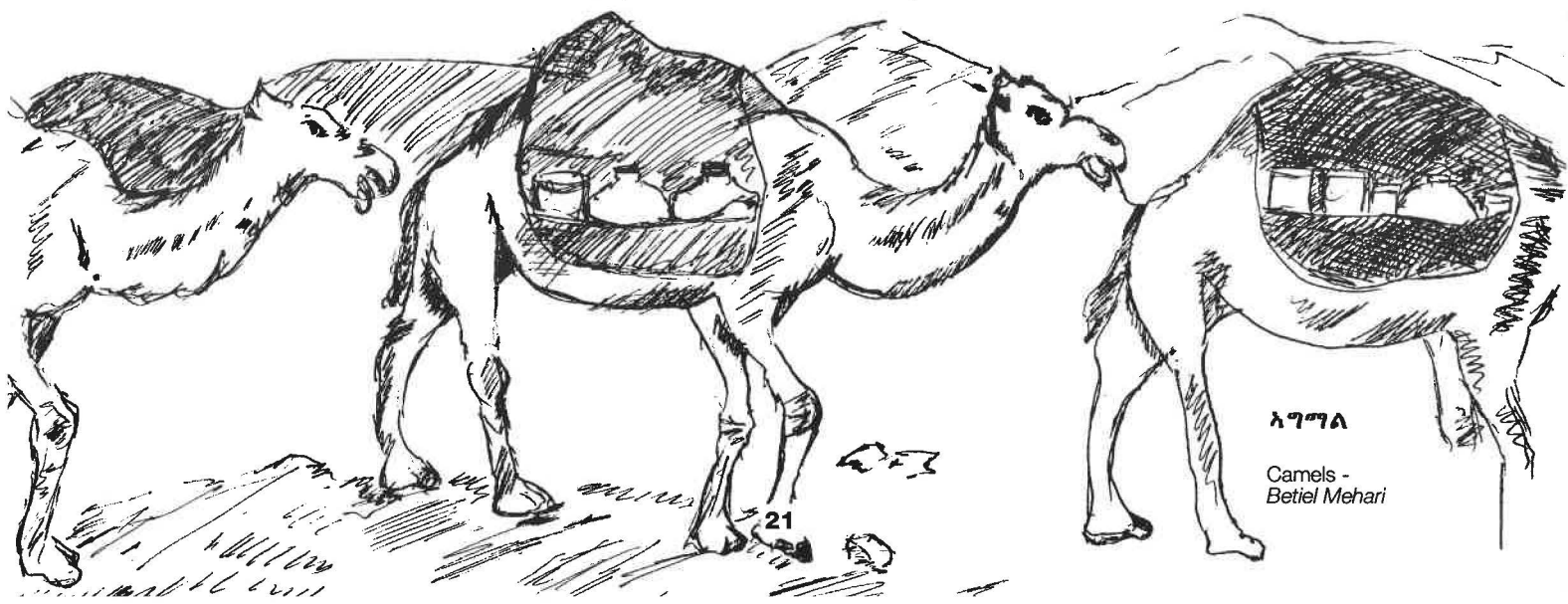
Though I hate to disappoint those of you who have built their fantasies of the desert as a Turkish Delight, it's not brilliant. First there's the dust, which after a night had successfully coated every hair of my head. And my skin felt like a fine grade of sandpaper; my lips were so dry that when I drank water, it felt like coming to life. Although we looked pretty grimy, at least we didn't smell. It was too dry for that.

As the camels slowly rose up, we were once again on our way. For nearly twelve hours a day we rode through the desert without stopping. Sitting on the camel's hump and gazing around me was as brilliant as the trip itself. To my surprise there was life in the desert and not just lines of sandy camels and oases guarded by groves of date palms. There were flies, snakes and thorn trees. However, there was silence too. A silence so clear and profound that if you listened carefully you could hear the sound of blood pumping around your body. It's a strange sound, bringing comfort and uneasiness. A reminder of the closeness of life and death and how the desert to me is a place of unearthly peace and beauty. One begins to understand why prophets have always gone to the desert to purify themselves. Nothing matters there but the essentials.

The sunset and wind shifted the clean golden sand, covering some broken stones and uncovering others.

Tomorrow was another day.....

**Betiel Mehari, now 19 years old  
written while at Southwark Sixth Form  
Centre, London**



# MY LIFE

## My family

My mother and father are from Massawa. They speak Tigre. They moved to Asmara. I was born in Asmara and lived there for eleven years. I am a Muslim. My father was a carpenter in Asmara. He made furniture – chairs and tables – and sold them from his shop. My father took me to Saudi Arabia when I was 11 to go to hospital. I had polio when I was 10 months old. My father went on a *hajj* to Saudi Arabia and I stayed with my mother's sister. My father and I stayed in Saudi for three years. He worked as a carpenter there too. I studied in Saudi Arabia and in the last two years I had 15 operations on my leg. Now it's much better. After my operations my father got me a teacher to come to the house. My father saw the fighting in Eritrea, in Massawa, on TV in Saudi Arabia. Ethiopian planes bombed Massawa. My father decided to go back to Eritrea to fight for the EPLF, and I came to England. I haven't seen my mother for three years. I think she's in Asmara, but I don't know. It's difficult. I don't know where my father is now he's fighting. He may be in Massawa or Nakfa. I have five sisters and seven brothers. One brother is a refugee in Sweden.

Another brother is in Libya, studying. My sisters are all married. Some of them went to Sudan. I don't know where they all are.

## Language

I speak four languages: Tigre, Tigrinya, Arabic and now English. My family spoke Tigre because they are from the Tigre community. So I spoke Tigre at home and Tigrinya to people in Asmara. I can't read or write Tigre or Tigrinya because I learnt to read and write Arabic at school – in Eritrea and in Saudi Arabia. I learnt a little bit of English in Eritrea. Ten years ago the English teaching in Eritrea was very good but now it's no good. My older brother's English is very good. Now I live in Basle Court in London I speak Tigrinya to other people from Eritrea, and also Arabic. I like my language but I can't learn English in Basle Court. I want to learn good English because I want to be a doctor. I'd like to live with an English family. My teacher said she went to Japan and she liked talking her own language to other English people and American people. But she's a teacher and I'm studying and I want to learn good English.

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Massawa, after the bombing of the city



Eric Onstadi/SYGMA

### **School**

I went to an Arabic school in Asmara – a *madrassah* – because I'm a Muslim. I started school when I was six years old. I studied the Holy Koran at the *madrassah*, and Maths, Science, Geography and Arab History. I studied everything in Arabic. I went to a *madrassah* because you wouldn't learn the Holy Koran in a Tigrinya school. I learnt a little English too. I liked Science best and Maths. I want to be a doctor because I had polio and went to hospital and saw lots of doctors. They helped me so I want to be a doctor too. I got up to class seven in Eritrea and then I went to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia I was in Class 12. After Class 12 you go to university. I feel angry because in September I could have gone to university in Saudi Arabia and now I'm in England I can't. In Eritrea and Saudi Arabia, if you don't study you don't go to the next class, like here.

### **Spare time**

In Asmara I had lots of friends. We used to play football. I was the goalkeeper, because of my bad leg. I also used to go to the cinema with my brother. We watched Hindi films. I don't understand Hindi, I just watched. Eritrean people like those Hindi films. There were three cinemas I went to – the Imperial, the Dante and the Roma. The Roma was my favourite. We walked to the cinema because it was near our house. Asmara has a football stadium. My brother and I used to go and watch football matches about once a week. I supported Fenji.

### **The war**

In my school they said Ethiopia and Eritrea were one country. It was a government school, that's why they said it. Here people say you are from Ethiopia and I say no, I'm from Eritrea. Ethiopia doesn't like Eritrean people. The USSR likes Ethiopia. Ethiopia and Eritrea have been fighting for more than 25 years. Eritrea wants to be free from Ethiopia. When I lived in Asmara I didn't see any fighting – the fighting was in the country. Now there's lots of fighting. The Eritreans have got Massawa but the Ethiopians want it back because it's by the sea. There was lots of fighting in Massawa. I saw it on TV. My father is fighting with the EPLF.

### **Coming to England**

I came to England two months ago, on 20th May 1990. I came by myself. I was scared. I came from Saudi Arabia. My father and I were in Saudi Arabia and he went back to Eritrea and I came here because of the fighting in Eritrea. It's dangerous

there. I came to England as a visitor. When I got to Heathrow it was cold. I thought it was air-conditioning! Then I realised it was England, not air-conditioning! It's so hot in Saudi Arabia. No one met me at Heathrow. My father told me to go to Earl's Court on the underground. His friend told me I could leave my bag in the lockers at Earl's Court station. So I asked in the reception at Heathrow where the underground was. I could speak English a little. I went on the underground. I saw where to go. But when I got to Earl's Court there was a big problem. There were no lockers, and my bag was very heavy. I had to carry it and I started to cry. There was just me and I didn't know what to do. Then an Eritrean man saw me in the street, crying. He took me to his house. He was a good man and we talked in Tigrinya. He said, "You sleep." I was very tired because I had left Saudi Arabia at two o'clock in the morning, and it was eight o'clock in the morning in England. At seven o'clock in the evening I phoned my brother in Sweden. He has a friend in Whitechapel and I went to stay with him.

I went to the Eritrean Community and gave them my passport. They will help me with the Home Office. I want to be a refugee. After that I went to Social Services. I went to a hostel but they said I was under age. I went back to my brother's friend. My money was finished. He gave me a bus pass and some money. I went back to the social workers. Those two weeks were a big problem. I went to a YMCA in Stockwell. The manager didn't like me. I went to a hostel called Basle Court. I was crying. They said, "OK, you can sleep here one night." That night I slept in the office on the floor, but I didn't mind. The next day they gave me a room. I live at Basle Court now. The social worker is good. But I'm not happy here. I have nobody here. I phoned my father from Heathrow and said I was OK but now I can't speak to him because I don't know where he is in Eritrea. I will go back to Eritrea when the fighting is over.

**Omar Ahmed, 14 years old**  
**Dick Sheppard School, London**

# COMING TO BRITAIN

## MY FIRST MONTHS IN LONDON

I came to England by myself. When I arrived in England there were many white people. I felt frightened, but I was also excited because I had not seen white people before. Then I had an interview. After two days the social worker took me to a children's home. It was near Heathrow Airport. I was there for three months. The place was very quiet and boring. I didn't know anyone to talk to while I was on my own. I was alone in my room. I had never been alone before. You never imagine yourself alone in one room every day. I had no one to talk to, had nothing to do, had nowhere to go, had no friends. Many times I felt bored. I turned on the radio. Sometimes I turned on the TV and the radio both at the same time. Sometimes I went for a walk. In my country, I never used to stay indoors for an hour. I never had time to stay indoors for so long. You have so many different places to go: to the cinema, to friends' houses, to nice places. Then after three months I found an Eritrean family and I lived with them.

**Saade-Din, 16 years old**  
**Hurlingham and Chelsea**

## COMING TO ENGLAND

I came from Eritrea. My home is in the city of Asmara. I came to London with my sister in September 1990. We flew from Addis Ababa in a big plane, a Boeing 767. We arrived at about six o'clock in the evening. My sister telephoned a friend in London and she came to Heathrow Airport to

take us to her home. The next day we went to the Eritrean Community Office in Islington and then we were taken to stay with some Catholic sisters in their house for six days. After that we went back to the Eritrean Community Office and we were taken to live in Heythrop College.

**Filmon Ghebrai,**  
**Southwell House**

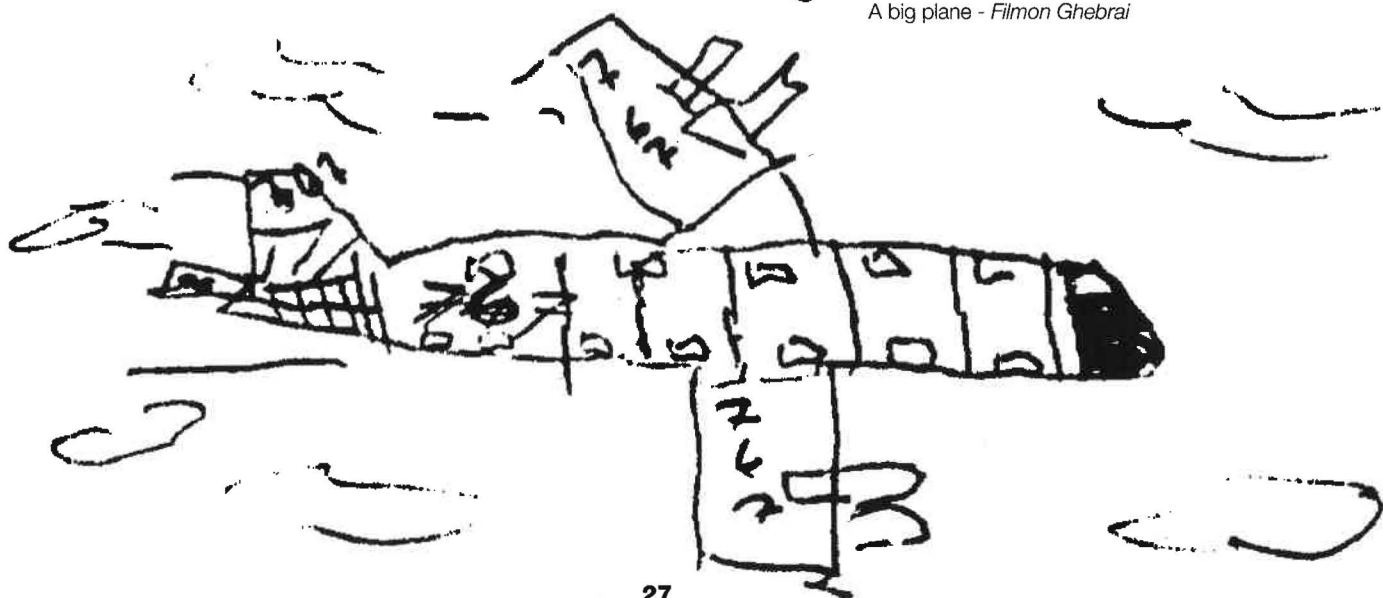
## JOURNEY TO ENGLAND

We were Eritreans living in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. We had a large house and we were quite well off. We had a big garden and a guard dog called Amien. He was a big German Shepherd dog. My mum worked as an accountant and my dad was a manager in an insurance company.

One day my dad left on a business trip and didn't come back. So we decided to leave and join him. I was five years old. We went by plane to Asmara in Eritrea where we stayed with my grandmother. An arrangement was made for us to flee to Sudan. First we went to Keren where we disguised ourselves as a village family. Then we started to walk to a small village called Lenshia. On the way we were suddenly stopped by a soldier from the Ethiopian army and searched. I was told not to speak so as not to be recognised as someone from the city. The soldier frightened me and I was scared to be searched. We weren't recognised so we were allowed to pass. Later on I learned that he had actually recognised us but still let us pass as he had been bribed by our desert guides.

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A big plane - Filmon Ghebrai



We reached Lenshia in the evening where the guides arranged camels to take us to Sudan. I remember the nine days in the Barka region of Eritrea very clearly. It's like the Sahara desert. We travelled on the camels with the guides. I didn't understand then that we were leaving Eritrea to live in England because I was too young. I remember we travelled with another family, and I remember small things like when my little sister Shanet refused to drink the water because it was brown. I didn't mind – I was so thirsty I was ready to drink anything. But I was a bit fussy about the food and didn't eat much. Everything seemed to taste of sand.

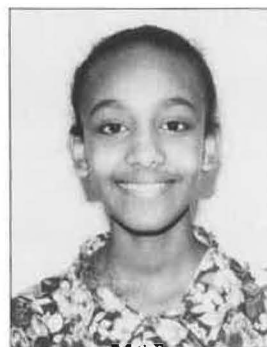
I'd noticed from the start how jumpy the guides were and this tension could be seen in all the other adults. Later on I learned that if we had been caught by the Ethiopian army we would all have been killed. It still frightens me now sometimes but I didn't know then which I suppose helped.

When we reached Ghermaica in Eritrea we stayed for a short while. Then we took a lorry to Kasala where we waited for two weeks to receive our passes. We stayed in a hut. Then we went to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and stayed with my uncle. My uncle's house had only one room where four single beds could just fit in. We had our baths in a tub. It was a bit hard but I got used to it.

While I was staying with my uncle I made friends with our neighbour's daughter. Her name was Rosa and we spent every day together. We made dolls out of pegs and scraps of material and played games. We became best friends. When it got dark we all went to bed. We moved our beds outside to sleep as it was too hot to sleep inside. But if there was a sandstorm we'd have no choice but to sleep inside. I still think of that small house and my friend Rosa.

Finally we got on a plane in Khartoum to our destination, England.

**Sinit Zeru, 12 years old**  
**Notre Dame School, Southwark, London**



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Sinit Zeru in London

## STARTING SCHOOL IN BRITAIN

When I started school I went with my sister and with my cousin. When I saw the building and the gate I was really terrified. My sister looked at me. She knew I was terrified. She said, "What's happened, Sara? Why has your face changed?" I couldn't answer her. Then we were in the office. The headmistress asked me a lot of questions. I didn't understand but my sister and cousin translated and then I understood. The headmistress said that I must start at school on Monday.

When Monday came I went to school alone. I didn't really know the way or which bus to catch. I got lost. I didn't ask anyone because I couldn't speak English. I felt very unhappy. I thought I must find the school, I can't go back home. At last I arrived at the school at half past 10. I went to the office and stopped at the window. They asked me something

but I couldn't speak. Then I said I could speak Arabic, so they found a girl who could speak Arabic. She asked me to explain what I wanted, and then a teacher took me to the class.

**Sara Sielu, 16 years old**  
**Hurlingham and Chelsea School, London**

# ON BEING A REFUGEE

For more than a quarter of a century the Eritrean people have been fighting an endless battle with Ethiopia. The demand is Eritrean Independence. My people firmly believe that Eritrea has the right to be a small independent country which is capable of supporting itself economically and politically. It is a country which is proud of its culture and traditions.

As a result of the war and the collapse of an already fragile economy, the people of Eritrea had no choice except to seek refuge in foreign countries. However, they only want to become refugees as a last resort, because they love their country passionately and wouldn't leave it for anything. As a desperate measure refugees leave their home and possessions in order to survive and be able to provide a safer and comfortable future for their children. It is not unusual for a refugee to have lived in more than two countries. It is sad, especially for the children, having to move from one country to another and start to plan their life from scratch.

Most refugees arrive at their destination without any knowledge of the country's language, weather or culture. Their expectations are very high; they think all their problems are going to be solved when they get there. They find life different and extremely difficult. They feel confused, lonely, trapped and uncertain about their future. The main problem is the language and because of the language difficulty they can't express themselves or the circumstances they have faced. However, that is one factor; there are several other factors like religious or cultural barriers which divide the asylum seeker and the provider. So refugees are driven to make their own community.

When you arrive in a European country such as Britain as a refugee, the last thing you need is an identity or social crisis. However the older generation were brought up in strict discipline and a religious environment so they feel and believe it is their duty to bring up the children the same way. However, young people who left their country at a very early age find themselves in a dilemma – not knowing if to follow in their parents' footsteps or let western society influence or exploit them. Either way they are confused and distressed. However good their traditions might be, they know that old traditions and beliefs do not always work in a foreign country.

The young generation of Eritrea find it very difficult to explain to their parents that they have pressure from them and the society which surrounds them. However much the older generation reinforce its religion, tradition and culture, Eritrean young people are becoming more and more "black British". It is a fact Eritrean people don't want to face. It is worrying to think in a few years Eritrean young people in Britain are going to lose their identity.

**Betiel Mehari, 19 years old**  
**South London College**



## **ADDRESSES**

THE ERITREAN COMMUNITY IN  
THE UK (ECUK)

**244/5 Upper Street**

**London N1 1RU**

**071 704 9272**

ECUK deals with legal rights,  
welfare issues and matters  
concerning refugee status and  
nationality.

THE ERITREAN  
INFORMATION SERVICE

**Unit 14-1, Park House,**

**140 Battersea Park Road,**

**London SW11 4NB**

**071 738 8477**

The EIS has a resource centre  
containing books, pamphlets and  
journals on Eritrea in several  
languages. The EPLF's European  
office is based there.

ERITREAN RELIEF ASSOCIATION  
(UK)

**96 White Lion Street**

**London N1 9PF**

**071 837 9236**

This book is part of the **VOICES** Series:

**VOICES FROM ERITREA**

**VOICES FROM KURDISTAN**

**VOICES FROM SOMALIA**

*“These stories will improve the understanding of teachers and students while also providing a means of valuing the experience of these students. They are particularly welcome as a resource for and about cultural groups for whom we have access to very few resources.”*

Carrie Cable, Head of ESL,  
North Westminster School, London

*“Excellent... these autobiographies will serve an extremely important function.”*

Philip Rudge, General Secretary,  
ECRE (European Consultation on Refugees and Exiles)



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London SW9 7DE

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Eritrean children